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ARTICLE

Consuming Ambivalences

Consumer handling of environmentally related risks in food

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Abstract. Consumers handle politicized consumption practices such as food risks in more ambivalent ways than is often assumed in public debate about such issues. This article attempts to show the analytical relevance of clarifying and using the concept of ambivalence in analysis of consumer culture. In particular, this is because societal problems of ambivalence are often framed as personal problems for consumers via campaigns to make consumers discipline their so-called problematic practices. The article argues in favour of working with a concept of ambivalence that is sensitive to a variety of socio-cultural ways of handling ambivalence in consumption practices. Theoretically, the article connects such a concept of ambivalence to an understanding of consumption that is grounded in 'weak' constructivist everyday life sociology. Empirically, the article presents examples of experiences of ambivalence from a Danish qualitative study of consumers' handling of environmentally related food risks.

Key words
ambivalence • consumption • everyday life • food • risk-handling

IN DENMARK, AS IN OTHER MODERN SOCIETIES, it has become increasingly common to call upon so-called ordinary consumers to solve a range of societal and political problems. Environmental policies and food policies are no exceptions to this pattern. Risks related to the uses of food and to environmental issues are frequently addressed in the Danish media. In public debate, as well as information campaigns, considerable attention is given to the ways in which food risks are handled by consumers. Among the recent

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topics of discussion are: additives in manufactured goods, pesticide residues in vegetables and fruit, straw-shortening chemicals in wheat and rye, growth hormones in meat, mad cow disease, dioxin in poultry products and genetically modified organisms in beans and corn.

There are some indications that the issue of risk-handling as related to food consumption is operative in the everyday understanding of at least some Danish consumers. According to Danish surveys, the reasons most frequently and consistently mentioned by consumers for selecting organic foods concern personal and family health. Some 37 percent of Danes now buy some organic foods always or for the most part (Gallup, 1999) and the total market share for organic produce now lies between 4 and 5 percent (Vestergaard, 1999).[1]

Both in public debate and in the initiatives that emerge from political institutions regarding the management of environmentally related risks of food consumption, issues tend to be discussed in terms of instrumental rationality (Beck, 1992; Szerszynski, 1999; Wynne, 1992). The working assumption appears to be that if consumers obtain sufficient relevant and correct information, they will handle risks in appropriate ways and will help implement solutions to environmental problems by changing their behaviour in accordance with recommendations. A number of sociological studies, however, indicate that consumers relate to risk issues in ways that are socially and culturally more complex and diverse than envisaged by policy makers (e.g. Halkier, 1999; Holm and Kildevang, 1996; Kjaernes, 1999; Sellerberg, 1991; Slovic, 1992). Handling risks in food consumption becomes part of the ambivalence of modern everyday life.

This article argues in favour of the need to address analytically the character of ambivalence in consumption practices, with particular regard to consumption practices that have become problematized or politicized. Ambivalence in such consumption practices is typically seen as a societal problem, for which consumers are to blame. For example, consumers enhance environmental problems by increasingly using their cars for shopping, even when shopping for organic foodstuffs. However, this kind of argument might result in treating ambivalent consumption as the problem of a particular social order in which individualized citizens have to solve societal problems by disciplining their bodily practices, a kind of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Thus, the societal problem of ambivalence is framed as a personal problem for consumers.

This article argues in favour of using a concept of ambivalence that is sensitive to different socio-cultural ways of handling ambivalence. This concept of ambivalence is developed by framing consumption practices in

terms of an analytical understanding of everyday life. The methodology of the Danish empirical study upon which these considerations are based is then briefly presented. Empirical examples of ambivalences in consumers' handling of food risks are presented. Finally, these are compared with empirical examples of public texts regarding consumers' handling of such risks.

CONSUMPTION AND AMBIVALENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Consumption is a particular field of practices within the sociality of everyday life, in which is combined the satisfaction of needs with expressions of identity (Falk, 1994; Gronow, 1997a; Warde, 1997). Consumption not only includes the activities of buying goods and services, but also social relations connected with the provision, allocation and use of goods and services. Thus, consumption is part of the social space in which people participate in creating and reproducing meanings about the occurrences of everyday life by attempting to knit together the experiences and roles they encounter daily (Gullestad, 1989; Luckmann, 1989). Consumers' experiences are both the basis and result of their practices and interpretations in interaction or in relation to important others (Berger and Luckmann, 1987: 33–48; Goffman, 1959: 245; Lave, 1988: 178–9; Schütz, 1975: 23–41). These experiences of life are, however, intimately related to the dynamics and institutions of society at large in ways that become clear when dealing with the topic of risk in food consumption. Environmental risks, closely related to the institutional dynamics of production, reproduction, consumption, infrastructure, technology and science, are being placed on the agenda at the kitchen table. Thus, trivial practices of individuals and families become problematized.

Food consumption practices constitute a particular kind of consumption since food is literally incorporated into the body, or kept out of it. Analysing food consumption thus means dealing with people's everyday experiences of practices that are characterized by material and sensuous experiences of taking things into, and keeping things out of, the body. Symbolically, these processes are linked to people's interpretations of social belonging and distancing (Falk, 1994: 24–7, 134–7). Furthermore, food practices belong to the unspectacular side of consumption and, as such, are characterized predominantly by habitual activities (Warde, 1997: 199) in which practices are remembered by the body and routinely carried out (Hastrup, 1995: 182–4).

When consumers attempt to tackle environmental risks related to their food, risk-handling becomes immersed in social experiences of food consumption. Risk-handling becomes part of practices, interpretations and

relations that may not have anything to do with risk in the first place. Hence, consumers produce their own ways of understanding and handling risks in food consumption (Sellerberg, 1991: 196).

These social and cultural manners of handling risk are often characterized by ambivalence. Neither the practices nor the understandings of risk handling can be conveniently categorized according to either–or distinctions. Polyvalent interpretations, social dilemmas and network negotiations have their roots in some of the characteristics of modern everyday life. People's lifeworlds have become fragmented and pluralized, and people identify with many different roles. At the same time, the individual is dependent on a number of larger societal institutions – the world market, the welfare state, the global media network – and more responsibility is being attributed to the individual. These trends yield what a Danish sociologist has coined 'insecurity of orientation' (Aagaard-Nielsen, 1997).

Consumers become concerned by a television show that exposes the poor quality of meat products but this experience is filtered out within a couple of days. They then return to the habit of buying a particular sausage (that contains little meat) because it is one their children like. Consumers would like to have better quality foods but feel at the same time that public information about food risks disturbs their experience of cooking and eating. Consumers express trust in public control procedures regarding food production – but, at the end of the day, what they most enjoy buying are food products of which they have personal knowledge. A British study highlights the main ambivalence that arises in relation to risk-handling in everyday life: the feeling of being pulled between an increased insecurity about knowing what to do and an increased awareness of possessing agency, the capacity to do something (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 97–101).

Discussing and defining a concept of ambivalence has not played a major role in sociology. The origin of ambivalence as an analytical concept is ascribed to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and his model of humans as being driven by inner conflicts between the wants of the id and the control of the superego (Bauman, 1991: 174–9). The general understanding in the social sciences of ambivalence as inner personal and cultural tensions between different aspects has its roots here. A concept of ambivalence has been particularly important in the social psychology of critical theory (e.g. Ziehe, 1988). However, I want to attempt to use a concept of ambivalence in a broader sociological way.

The Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman primarily combines the Freudian notion of ambivalence with a processual modality of social life (Bauman, 1992: 190), inspired by Georg Simmel's understanding of

social life as interaction or sociation (*vergesellschaftung*) (Simmel, 1998: 25). In Bauman's hands, the concept of ambivalence is indeterminate as a result of recognizing the openness of processes in social life.

Bauman (1991: 61) broadens the original meaning of Freud's concept to all types of social meaning: ambivalence is defined in contradistinction to classificatory order: 'No binary classification deployed in the construction of order can fully overlap with essentially non-discrete, continuous experience of reality. The opposition, born of the horror of ambiguity, becomes the main source of ambivalence.' His central arguments regard the character of modern (or rather post-modern) societies in which people acknowledge the impossibility of achieving secure, final, unambiguous order with respect to knowledge about society and themselves. Hence, postmodern social life means living with ambivalence without guarantees (1991: 231–43).

From a social-psychological standpoint, ambivalence needs to be handled somehow because people cannot stay in a condition of tension. But this handling can assume different psychological forms such as repression or attempts to form personality structures (Holm, 1991: 75–6; Ziehe, 1988: 156–65). I argue that a sociological concept of ambivalence also has to be open to a variety of social and cultural ways of living with (not in) ambivalence. I interpret Bauman's use of ambivalence as being capable of this. But in order to use a concept of ambivalence for concrete analytical work, it is necessary to specify further Bauman's broad understanding of ambivalence.

I understand ambivalence as a social dynamic that is contradictory to classificatory order in social discourses about practices. Ambivalence can play different roles in people's everyday lives, not just creating conflictual tension. People's everyday food practices – such as risk-handling – are characterized by contingency. Social life is neither entirely coincidental nor entirely determined, or it can be both at the same time (Mortensen, 1991: 54). In order to understand the different empirical expressions of ambivalence among the consumers in my study, I have supplemented my interpretation of Bauman's concept of ambivalence with the understandings of two sociologists of consumption – Jukka Gronow (1997a, b) and Alan Warde (1994, 1997). Both of them work with conceptions where consumers can handle ambivalence in different social ways, such as normalizing ambivalence. The analytical specificities are discussed in the first empirical section.

REPRESENTING CONSUMERS

The following empirical examples of different ambivalence experiences around risk-handling in food consumption are selected from an in-depth

qualitative study of a number of Danish couples who are parents of small children.[2] The data comprise two sets. The first set was generated by focus groups,[3] and involves consumers' accounts of how they handle environmentally related food risks. The second set of data comprises a selection of public texts that represent the consumers' role in relation to environmentally related food risks.

Six focus group interviews were undertaken, each comprising 4–6 parents, distributed among people who had and had not completed secondary school education, and who were resident in a big city, a provincial town or the countryside. The data were analysed by qualitative coding and categorizing (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), domain interpretations and metaphors (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Spradley, 1979), as well as discourse and conversation analysis (Antaki, 1994; Potter, 1996). The participants discussed what preoccupies them in regard to food in everyday life, what they understand as risky and safe kinds of food, whether and how the issue of risky and safe food is related to environmental problems, and how the individual family handles such problems. During the latter part of each focus group interview, participants were prompted to talk about the environment, by presenting to them food products thought to be controversial. The analysis was also designed to address the following questions: What is understood by risk? Which consumption practices are constructed as risky? What other meanings are associated with risky consumption? How is the relation of the consumer to risky consumption socially constructed?

The participants within each focus group were recruited from the same social network, a procedure that differed from most focus group research (Morgan, 1997: 37–8). The argument was that strangers do not tend to act out and freely express underlying tensions or conflicts in the same manner as those who are more familiar with each other. This study was designed to illuminate the ways in which consumers' understandings and practices are socially embedded. This includes the variety of social relations, such as identifications, differentiations and conflicts that might be involved in handling risk issues within a social network. Such social relations are continuously negotiated in focus group discussions. Interactions in group conversations also play a part in forming the substance of the individual's contribution as well as in the flow of meanings expressed by a particular group. Thus, the social dynamics of negotiation are part of constituting meaning, reasons, rules and the legitimate breaking of rules. In terms of conversation analysis, 'Talk is traffic' (Antaki, 1994: 107).

The meaning of the word 'risk' is open and flexible, but in conversations (here, group discussions) concrete, situational fixations of different

meanings of the word are constructed (Garfinkel, 1967: 4–7; Potter, 1996: 43–6, 178). This happens in the interplay between the above-mentioned social dynamics, the individual narratives of the participants and the larger socio-cultural discursive repertoires available in society. Discursive repertoires are understood as larger complexes of socio-linguistic constructions. Such repertoires work as frameworks for the construction of meaning, but in principle their contents are unfinished and unstable in some respects (Hall, 1997: 62; Laclau, 1996: 48–53). Discursive repertoires can be referred to, combined, re-interpreted or rejected by the members of the society in which they occur. Individual narratives are understood as the actively narrativized accounts of the participants' experiences (Finnegan, 1997: 69), consumers in this instance.

The public texts were selected from amongst those frequently referred to in the focus group discussions, and which seemed to have contributed to consumers' interpretations of risk handling. Four different types of texts were analysed: the actual consumer goods themselves (24 relevant items); leaflets distributed through the major supermarket chains by public authorities or by manufacturers of alternative food-produce (14 items, from 1996–9); a number of television shows with themes concerning food and risk (9 items, from 1997–9); and daily news broadcasts from the two national Danish television stations, covering the case of dioxin in Belgian food during the summer of 1999 (38 items). The texts were analysed as discursive repertoires, as narratives (Hansen et al., 1998: 132–55) and for their connotative and denotative aspects (Hall, 1997: 38). This analysis was designed to illuminate the same range of questions as those posed in relation to the focus group data.

AMBIVALENCES IN CONSUMERS' RISK-HANDLING

This section looks at material from the empirical study, presented in terms of four different types of ambivalence experience in food consumption practices related to the handling of risk. The four different types of ambivalence experience arise mainly from the empirical material. This section presents four different ways in which consumers experience ambivalence in their risk-handling practices. Other studies could probably find more and different experiences. These are meant as analytical examples with which to continue the discussion of the role of ambivalence and its conceptualization in the study of consumer culture. It is important to note that although the material is presented through quotations that illustrate each type, individual consumers in fact used and referred to several types of ambivalence in their individual narratives and in their social negotiations with each

other. They are not mutually exclusive but cut across different contexts and social relations of their everyday life.

Ambivalence as tension

The first type of experience of ambivalence in risk-handling food consumption is related to the original meaning of ambivalence as a conflict resulting in tensions for the individual consumer. Alan Warde's discussion of ambivalence in food consumption is a good starting point (Warde, 1997: 67–9). As part of a large empirical study of British food habits in the 1990s, Warde discusses the contradictory pulls on consumers between novelty and custom. He relates this to an ambivalence between excitement, insecurity and social status on the one hand and security and being seen as unfashionable on the other hand. Hence, ambivalence in food consumption can be seen in terms of tensions of modernity that can be difficult to 'solve' socially. Warde (1994: 65) interprets Bauman as seeing ambivalence as hazardous to the individual, and he argues that the tensions of ambivalence do not necessarily make consumers anxious. In fact, in the following two empirical examples, people do not exhibit anxiety but rather irritation over ambivalence.

Jan,[4] a 37-year-old nursery-school teacher, lives with Mette, who is the same age and has the same occupation. They have four young children in their house in a big city. They enjoy cooking very much, and they spend time together at long family meals at the weekends. They are particularly fond of traditional Danish meals with pork and thick sauce, and they follow the seasons for vegetables and fruit. But primarily they eat what they enjoy and they arrange meals to strengthen family feeling – for example, having big breakfasts even on weekdays.

They never buy organic foodstuffs or read content labels in order to avoid particular substances. Mette seldom reflects on food risks unless she has seen something on television that makes her avoid, for example, meat sausage for a short while until she starts buying it again because it is the children's favourite. Jan, on the other hand, does reflect upon risk, but he is irritated by the amount of risk-communication in society. He expresses a diffuse mistrust of all types of risk-knowledge, and he feels that his eating and enjoyment of good food is spoiled by the problematization of food quality in the media, and by campaigns about how one should behave sensibly in relation to environmental risks and health risks:

> I still think it's really annoying if these television shows somehow . . . no information is good. But . . . I think that the

> quality of all kinds of foodstuff has somehow, to use that word, raised suspicions about food and these kind of things. I think that all food is infested with you having to be suspicious about it . . . the sheer enjoyment and pleasure of it, and just being, just incorporating, you know without having to have those great reflections about whether it comes from one place or another. I think it's bloody annoying. And somehow I would really like to drop it. You know, completely stop thinking about it. Only say what I feel like and buy that and make it the end of the story.

At 34, Johannes works at a children's home and lives in the countryside with Minna and their three young children. They are partly self-sufficient in vegetables and poultry, and they can barter for other kinds of meat within their social network. They, too, enjoy cooking together, and they like to recall situations where they have managed to get hold of particularly good pork or fish.

They do not use herbicides in their allotment, and they do buy some of their basic foodstuff as organic goods. Johannes, however, becomes frustrated about new knowledge of environmental risk in foodstuffs when he sees a television show about it, because – although it forces him to reflect on the problems – he feels that he has no real possibility of doing anything about it. He gets irritated about the ways in which media and commercials remind him about risk and interrupt his routine shopping. For example, on a label on a loaf of bread:

> I think about that one, actually it irritates me . . . baked without straw-shortener, right . . . you know, straw-shortened wheat . . . because it makes me think that it is put there because some while ago there was a debate about horses being less fertile or their sperm-quality being much lower due to straw-shortener, right. And this is meant to make me think that straw-shortener is something terrible, which I think it probably IS . . . but I find it tiresome that they have to manipulate with such a bloody sign there, it irritates me. And this is . . . if I go shopping, what I buy is directed by what irritates me.

This way of experiencing ambivalence expresses the fact of living with tension. Ambivalence as tension in food consumption seems to accord with the ambivalence of bodily practices between desire and control emphasized

by research that relates body and culture to general historical tendencies in modernity (e.g. Elias, 1978: 245–63; Foucault, 1978: 139–-45).[5]

Ambivalence as legitimate

Whereas the former kind of ambivalence is characterized by an uncomfortable inner tension or even conflict, in this case consumers experience ambivalence as an acceptable aspect of their risk-handling. Ambivalence is a basic condition of being a food consumer in modern society, hence these consumers can differentiate themselves from those having a personal problem. Ambivalence is something they have to learn to live with, because it arises from recognizing the contingency of social life (Bauman, 1991: 237; 1992: 193).

Katrine, a 29-year-old nurse, is on maternity leave with the second of her two daughters. She is married to the electrician Jes and they live in a small provincial town. Katrine tries to vary their meals in order to cover all the food groups, but at the same time they must be acceptable to their elder daughter. She feels guilty when the family goes to McDonalds or when they have sausages with mashed potatoes for dinner because she understands such meals as junk food that is not good for them. Katrine describes a number of strategies she employs to buy less risky foodstuff, such as avoiding 'tinned and powder food' and goods that contain genetically modified substances, opting for Danish foodstuff and organic goods. She would like to buy more organic foodstuffs but Jes does not trust the state-regulated label for organic goods. Katrine also finds them too expensive.

Katrine's practical experiences with ambivalence are related to knowing a lot about the potential risks of foodstuffs but finding that this knowledge cannot guide routine consumption because it is in itself ambivalent. She accepts the need to live without always dealing with the risks of consumption:

> You just don't know . . . because then sometimes I start thinking about . . . the bacteria that might get you ill here and now, but you just don't KNOW about these additives, is it something in the longer run . . . and why are they there, ARE there more cases of cancer, or is it just because now they have discovered them, right? Or IS it because there is something completely sick in our food, right? But you just can't . . . if you have to have food on the table every day, you just can't go around and think about it every day . . .

Jane at 29 works as a fishmonger and is married to Hasse, a mechanical engineer. Jane is pregnant with their second child, and they live in a small provincial town. Hasse prepares most of the meals, while Jane shops because it is she who keeps an eye on their household budget. Jane finds organic goods much too expensive to buy, and she does not think about environmental risk in food, except in relation to their own small garden. She considers their own home-grown potatoes to be more healthy than the ones in the supermarket, and in the shops she avoids vegetables that look unnaturally nice and big to her. Hence, 'artificial' is associated with 'risky'. Jane expresses acceptability of employing shifting food practices in relation to risk. She sees good reasons in the routines and structures of daily life for consumers to act with ambivalence, and she explains ambivalent practices by putting forward a factual-seeming account of them:

> But what can you do yourself . . . you try in some areas, right, you know . . . one day you go out and tear up the weed, and the next time you don't have the time, so you spray against the weed, although you know it's not really smart . . . and that's the way it is, you know . . .

This way of accounting for ambivalence – as characterized by facticity, a sense that this is just the way things are – is also part of Katrine's narrative about her ambivalences. Such factual accounts can be interpreted as establishing the legitimacy of one's own practices (Potter, 1996: 122–4). The conditions of our lives as consumers are ambivalent, thus it is understandable that we act ambivalently. This interpretation parallels Alan Warde's argument that the purpose of handling ambivalence is often in order to become socially acceptable (Warde, 1994: 65).

Ambivalence as normal

To experience ambivalence in one's food practices as legitimate because it is a condition that one has to learn to live with is not necessarily the same as *having* learned to live with it. However, some consumers seem to have become used to incorporating ambivalences in ways that neither produce much tension nor need much legitimation. Instead, it becomes normalized and rather unproblematic to combine ambivalent practices into the overall story of oneself as a consumer. This way of experiencing ambivalence parallels Jukka Gronow's (1997b: 6–7) argument about one way consumers can handle risk in food: consumers routinize their food practices to some extent, but are also able to incorporate changes or deviations in normalized ways. Gronow partly builds on Georg Simmel's writings on fashion.

Simmel's argument is that subjective individual changes in style can be incorporated via fashion into a recognizable social frame as *bricolage*, without necessarily creating tension (Simmel, 1991: 69).

Cecilie, a 30-year-old employed in a clothing shop, lives in the countryside with her husband Boris, a technician, and their 2-year-old son. Cecilie is very preoccupied with getting something to eat quickly when she is hungry and therefore often makes something quick and easy after work. She follows the debates in the media about food, risk and environment, and she worries about all the things that she feels she cannot know about foodstuffs due to the long distance 'from earth to table', for example genetically modified organisms in soybeans. Cecilie buys and uses seasonal vegetables and fruit and she routinely buys as many organic goods as possible.

In the following quotation, her narrative can be interpreted as expressing how she combines the ambivalence of using organic food and fast food:

> I don't know . . . you know, I think I have a tendency to have ideological taste buds . . . someone once told me . . . [laughter] . . . I simply BELIEVE that organic tomatoes taste better than the traditional ones . . . so if they have something organic for sale . . . in the shop today . . . you know, if they for example have organic cauliflower, that can make me feel like eating cauliflower soup. I don't feel like it all winter, because . . . I don't know, I AM quite selective, because you know . . . I just pass by the vegetable shelves 'cause never mind about the traditional ones, it's about organic things, right . . . now they had cucumbers, right, so we are going to get tzatziki this week . . . so I go after the organic label a lot in this manner . . . then now and then we get a tin of non-organic sausages and bad consciousness.

Cecilie expresses acceptance of her own handling of the perceived ambivalence between 'bad' fast food and 'good' organic food. Her narrative can be interpreted as fitting the deviation of tinned fast food into a style of fresh organic food in a normalizing way. The tinned fast food is regarded as her choice, not as something conditioned by the way things are.

Avoiding ambivalence?

When the ambivalences of handling risks in food consumption are not experienced as legitimate or normal, or when the tension of such ambivalences becomes too powerful, one result can be an attempt to escape from ambivalence. For all the consumers in this study, regardless of social background, some of their significant experiences of ambivalence come

from their daily negotiations between their reflections and their routines around food practices. Thus, one way consumers try to avoid ambivalence is by routinizing their risk-handling practices, since routinization can work as a kind of relief from modern demands about reflecting and choosing actively in all situations (Ilmonen, 1997: 4–5).

Helle is a 26-year-old nurse who is pregnant with her third child. She is married to Hans who is a factory worker. They live in an old farmhouse in the countryside, and they are self-sufficient in vegetables, fruit, eggs and poultry. To them, self-sufficiency means knowing what is in their food, and ensuring that the children get to know where food comes from. Helle does not reflect on environmental risks when shopping, cooking and eating, and she never buys organic goods in the stores – only from neighbours. She expresses distrust of much of the mediated knowledge about risk coming from authorities and experts; she has more confidence in products when she knows the producer personally. Helle establishes her own practical routines for handling problems in food associated with risk, which she can then stop worrying about. She handled salmonella in eggs and poultry in this way, as well as pesticide-residues in fruit:

> I think about such things as fruit and the like. You can't assess it, when they say that it's not sprayed. But I don't believe very much in that, you know. I think it's sprayed to some extent, all of it, you know. But really, you can't do anything else than – then you have to buy it and wash it, and . . . eat it.

This kind of routinization of consumers' risk-handling in order to avoid ambivalence can be used to question one of the theses of Zygmunt Bauman, related to his overall argument on ambivalence and modernity. Bauman (1995) works with two types of ethical practices. In the ethics of conformity, the individual is responsible *towards* a social code or institution, and she or he can routinize practices. In the ethics of responsibility, the individual is responsible *for* something or somebody, and she or he has to reflect and decide upon – and possibly also negotiate with others – which practices to choose. Hence, his argument is that the ethics of responsibility gradually replaces the ethics of conformity in step with the increasing role of ambivalence. However, the existence of routinized risk-handling in food consumption perhaps points to the continuing importance of ethics of conformity in this area.

AMBIVALENT OR VICTIM?

In the introduction to this article, I argued that issues of risk in relation to consumption are generally debated in the public sphere, and attempts to

manage such risks are usually undertaken in ways that exclude ambivalences over consumption practices. This tendency also seems to hold in regard to the particular issue explored here, the handling of environmentally related food risks in the Danish case. In order to test this argument, this last section of the article contains a brief comparison of the ways in which the consumer's role in relation to food risks is constructed by, respectively, the focus groups of younger parents and by the public texts to which these parents most frequently refer.[6]

In the focus groups, comprising parents of small children, the most prevalent construction of the role of the consumer in relation to handling food risks concerns the consumer as an ambivalent actor. This construction is found in each of the different network groups, irrespective of differences in the social background of the participants. A typical example is the following negotiation between Jan, Mette and Marie, from one of the big cities. They agree that consumers are caught between their ideals and the conditions of making everyday life work.

> *Jan*: The chickens we had tonight, actually they are Easter food, right? But it's often difficult. In reality, it is limited to a couple of months where you can get chickens . . . if you should follow the seasons, right? [*Marie*: Yeah . . .]
>
> *Mette*: But that's also the ideal thought. You know, that's when you talk about it and think, oh but what is it I would prefer to do. Now and then you remember that this is what you prefer to do – and then there are the days where you fuck-all just have to get the children from institution and shop and you are off at seven o'clock, right? Then it's roast pork and . . . [*Jan*: Oh, you mean Monday to Friday?] . . . and French fries or such things.
>
> *Marie*: You know, if the children can choose what we are having today, we are getting something roast with potatoes and gravy. And then you know there's peace and quiet! Everyone eats and is happy.
>
> *Mette*: This is what . . . at least I think this is important to allow yourself to say, but that's the way it is then, right? [*Marie*: Mmm]

The two further, and almost as popular, constructions of the consumer's role are, respectively, the consumer as a weak actor and the consumer as an engaged actor. An example of a construction of the consumer as weak actor comes from Carl, a forest guard who lives in a big city with his wife and daughter:

> . . . the attention directed to our foodstuffs in the media is frustrating because all of a sudden . . . what we eat is what we become, right? Of course you can deliberately choose something that is healthy, but you know there are some things we cannot choose ourselves. You say this about fish being healthy food . . . but in reality you know, they've poured DDT and everything into the sea which the fish munches.

An example of the consumer as an engaged actor comes from Minna, a nursery-school teacher with three children, living in the countryside. Here, she and her husband both draw on an assumption that the consumer is an engaged actor, although they disagree on the purpose of engagement:

> *Minna*: But I suppose you can say when we pay 3–5 kroner extra for two kilo flour, right, when we buy flour . . . then it's also because we believe that we get a better product, if it's ecological, right?
>
> *Johannes*: No. It isn't . . . for me. It's because I . . . don't believe that this flour tastes better, you know. I think that . . .
>
> *Minna*: No, no . . . but a better product in the sense that . . . well, we can't know, can we . . . but it's because we hope that there AREN'T so many residues of all sorts of strange things that we don't know how will react in our body, right? That's why we are willing to pay a little bit more for it, right?

Comparing these constructions with those in various public texts, the most prevalent role constructed for the consumer in relation to food risks is that of the consumer as victim or weak actor. The prevalence of this construction runs across all four types of texts, but it is especially characteristic of television shows and of television news.

An example comes from the television news in the summer of 1999 (TV2, 1999). The story is about how Danish supermarkets are clearing their shelves of a number of Belgian foods that are suspected of being contaminated with residues of the cancerous poison, dioxin. The villains in the story are the Belgian poultry and egg contractors who have supplied the Danish market with contaminated food. The victims are the consumers, who are unknowingly in danger of eating foods containing residues of cancerous elements. And the heroes are the Danish authorities, who are threatening to impose an import ban if they are not provided with solid and controlled information about the Belgian goods.

Analyses of the historical development of Danish television news demonstrates that from the 1990s a stronger orientation towards the intimate sphere has taken place in both form and substance (Hjarvard, 1999: 23). As part of this change of orientation, populist discursive repertoires have again begun to dominate. Populist discourse in this context refers to story-lines in which representatives of power are ascribed negative roles and citizens are ascribed positive ones (pp. 148–54). Although very engaged consumers and consumer organizations might not call it a positive role to construct the consumer as victim, it can be interpreted as positive since victims, by definition, are wronged because they are right. In analytical narratology, victims simply need the help of heroes or other helpers (Hansen et al., 1998: 142–8).

The two next most popular roles attributed to the consumer in relation to risk-handling that were constructed in the public texts are: the consumer as hero or influential actor, and the consumer as implicitly confident. The latter role is exclusively constructed in relation to the labelling of food products. One example concerns a packet of fresh pork chops from the supermarket, bearing the state-controlled label, 'Quality with Care'. The criteria noted on the label include more concern with animal welfare than in traditional farming, no antibiotic growth hormones and packaging not containing PVC. There is no text on the package explicitly indicating what the consumer's role should be. Goods, more frequently than other types of public text, are interpreted by means of the symbolic and connotative dimensions of culture (McCracken, 1988: 71–7), there often being little or no explicit verbal text. The different possible symbolic representations of a packet of ordinary pork chops are framed (Goffman, 1974: 560–63) by the label. The label conveys the assumptions of a larger discursive repertoire: that consumers can place their trust in the public authorities' labelling and control schemes that attempt to regulate risk in food. Hence, the labelling of pork chops can be read as assuming the consumers' implicit trust in abstract, institutional relations (Misztal, 1996: 99–100).

The role in which the consumer emerges as hero or strong actor is mainly constructed in information leaflets distributed by public authorities and manufacturers of alternative produce. An example is a leaflet on organic vegetables, distributed through supermarkets by an organization of organic producers (Økologisk Landscenter, 1998). The following extract is from the very beginning of the leaflet:

> It is you as a consumer who plays a part in deciding whether we shall have more organic farming in Denmark. By buying organic

> fruit and vegetables, not only do you benefit nature and promote a better environment – but also your own health.

This construction of the consumer's role in relation to environmental food risks draws on several discursive repertoires, including a repertoire of political activism and a liberal repertoire, in which the consumer is the executer of autonomous market choices (Gabriel and Lang, 1995: 27–46, 152–72).

In public texts, the consumer is hardly ever constructed as being ambivalent in relation to food risks. Such instances that were identified in my material involved a few segments within longer television programmes. An example is from a television show concerning differences between the content of various familiar food products and the declarations and appraisals on their packaging (Rapporten, 1998). The main storyline of the show is that ordinary consumers cannot trust packaged goods to reflect their true contents because manufacturers try to sell their products by attributing to them qualities that are more positive than their real ones. Verbal and visual arguments and effects are used to attempt to construct authoritative factual claims supporting this main storyline, similar to television news genres (Hansen et al., 1998: 214). The consumer is constructed as victim or as a weak actor. But within the same programme, interviews with a food science expert and with a representative of the Danish Consumer Council construct the consumer as an engaged and potentially influential actor. The food science expert expresses himself in the following way, for example: 'There is a will and an ability in the population to pay for quality.'

This brief comparison between the different constructions of the consumer in relation to food risks supports the general argument in the introduction to this article. Consumers' constructions of their role are dominated by ambivalence whereas public constructions of consumers' role represent hardly any ambivalence and primarily, although definitely not exclusively, ascribe to consumers the role of victim in need of assistance from other social actors.

CONCLUSION

In modern society, ordinary consumers are frequently called upon to solve different societal and political problems. In Denmark, this is very much so in the case of risk-handling in food and environmental politics. In the public sphere, issues regarding environmentally related food risks are often debated and attempts are made to manage them in terms of instrumental rationality. But consumers relate to risk issues in ways that are socially and culturally more complex and diverse.

This article has attempted to show the analytical relevance of clarifying and using the concept of ambivalence in the analysis of consumer culture. This is particularly the case since the societal problem of ambivalence is often framed as the consumers' personal problem in campaigns that aim to make consumers discipline their so-called problematic practices. The article argues in favour of working with a concept of ambivalence that is open and sensitive to a variety of socio-cultural ways of handling ambivalence in consumption practices, in order to challenge the present governmentality around problematized or politicized consumption practices.

Notes

1. Denmark has a state-controlled labelling scheme for organic products, and a growing variety of environmentally less damaging food products are becoming widely available in the retail sector.
2. The study is entitled 'The Risks of Consumption: Environmental Norms and Consumer Practices', and it was financed by The Strategic Programme for Environmental Research in Denmark. The study was carried out under the auspices of the Centre for Social Scientific Environmental Research in Denmark (CeSam).
3. The study has exchanged its focus group interview schedule with a Norwegian research project regarding consumer trust and distrust, headed by Unni Kjærnes, SIFO, Oslo (Nygård, 1999).
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. For a more thorough discussion of this ambivalence in bodily practices, see Halkier, 2001.
6. A much more comprehensive analysis of the materials regarding public texts has been undertaken. A brief summary account is presented here for reasons of space.

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